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U.S. SENATOR

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CHAFEE REAFFIRMS SUPPORT FOR SENATE BILL BANNING SNOWMOBILES IN YELLOWSTONE AND GRAND TETON NATIONAL PARKS

Legislation Codifies Clinton-era Environmental Regulation

WASHINGTON, DC – As the lead Republican sponsor, U.S. Senator Lincoln Chafee today reaffirmed his support for S. 965, the Yellowstone Protection Act – to provide legal permanence to Clinton-era regulations designed to phase out the use of snowmobiles in the Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks.

On January 21, 2001, the National Park Service (NPS) ruled that snowmobile use was inconsistent with the mission of the Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks and that increasing use of these vehicles was inflicting serious and permanent harm to the park's ecological balance. As a result, the NPS issued regulations designed to gradually phase out the use of snowmobiles beginning the winter of 2002-2003. Unfortunately, implementation of this regulation was delayed by the Bush Administration.

Earlier this month, the Bush Administration issued a final rule allowing up to 1,100 snowmobiles with cleaner-burning, four-stroke engines to enter Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks daily. The Final Rule requires 80 percent of the 1,100 snowmobilers to travel in groups with commercial guides, and eventually limits access to snowmobile models with engines implementing "best available technology" as certified by the NPS. The 2003-2004 winter season was scheduled to begin today; however, a recent decision by the U.S. Circuit Court for the District of Columbia overturned the new rule and restored the Clinton Administration rule enacting a complete snowmobile ban on snowmobiles in the parks by December 2004.

"The Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks were established to ensure that future generations inherit healthy and vibrant natural systems," said Chafee. "The Yellowstone Protection Act would codify the Clinton-era rule into federal law, and thereby ensure immediate action to preserve the natural wonders of these two national parks. Since 1999, public support for phasing snowmobiles out of the two parks has been strong. While snowmobile use can continue in areas surrounding the parks, this legislation protects the sensitive habitats and wildlife within the park boundaries, thereby ensuring their environmental integrity remains intact. I'm proud to be the lead

Republican sponsor of a bill that balances environmental protection of our national parks with an approach that continues to allow visitors to enjoy the beauty and wonder of these natural areas,” Chafee concluded.

Legal Obligations to Preserve the National Park System:

The 1916 Organic Act directs the National Park Service to manage national parks “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” As a result, the NPS has a legal obligation to ensure that snowmobile use is consistent with the agency’s mission of conservation.

The Clinton-era Snowmobile Regulation:

In January 2001, NPS adopted a regulation that calls for a gradual phase-out of snowmobiles beginning in the winter of 2002-2003. By the winter of 2003-2004, all over-snow access to both parks would be provided by snowcoaches. Twenty-two public hearings were held, and over 64,000 comments were received as part of the public review of winter transportation in the parks, with a vast majority favoring a mass transit system consisting of modern snowcoaches. In addition, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) later confirmed the validity of the science applied during this evaluation.

Two years ago, the Bush Administration allowed the final regulation for snowmobile use in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks to move forward. However, in June 2001, the Administration reached a settlement in a lawsuit brought by the snowmobile manufacturing industry that provided for the preparation of a supplemental environmental impact statement (SEIS) that must consider “new technology” and alternatives to the complete phase-out of snowmobiles in Yellowstone and Grand Teton. The SEIS and a final NPS decision on snowmobile use were released earlier this year.

Scheduled to become effective today when the parks opened for the winter season, the NPS Final Rule implements the March 2003 Record of Decision for winter use in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks and the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Memorial Parkway. The Final Rule requires daily limits on the number of snowmobiles that would be allowed in the parks; guided access for both commercial and non-commercial snowmobilers; and Best Available Technology requirements for snowmobiles.

Yellowstone Protection Act:

The Yellowstone Protection Act would acknowledge the judgments of the EPA and NPS by codifying the Clinton-era regulation into federal law. By doing so, this legislation would prevent implementation delays, decrease the threat of further litigation, and ensure that the Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks are protected from further snowmobile-induced harm. The legislation is cosponsored by Senators Harry Reid (D-NV), Jon Corzine (D-NJ), Paul Sarbanes (D-MD), and Joseph Lieberman (D-CT).

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